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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000296

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [YM](#) [COUNTER](#) [TERRORISM](#) [DOMESTIC](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: YEMENIS DISCUSS AL QAEDA ESCAPEES: GOVERNMENT SOAP  
OPERA OR NATIONAL EMERGENCY?

Classified By: DCM NABEEL KHOURY, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Post contacts, media outlets and websites are thus far treating the February 3 Al-Qaeda jailbreak as less of a national emergency and more as another peculiar power struggle within the ROYG. Contacts universally dismiss the ROYG's claim that the prisoners dug a tunnel and escaped through a mosque, contending instead that an unknown official with enough clout simply let them go free. Several individuals speculate that elements within the ROYG liberated the prisoners to engage them in covert security operations, as was done during the civil war with the south. The absence of any visibly stepped-up security measures in Sanaa or other major towns and the official media's overall avoidance of the issue (after having announced it in the first place) are lending some credibility in the eyes of some to contacts' views that the Government itself is somehow implicated in the affair. END SUMMARY

2. (C) During the course of February 5 and 6, poloff spoke with a range of contacts to obtain their views on the recent escape of 23 Al-Qaeda supporters, including men implicated in the bombings of the USS Cole and the M/V Limberg. All dismissed the claim published on February 3 in the news website of the military weekly "26 September" that the prisoners had dug a tunnel and had emerged in a women's bathroom at a nearby mosque. (NOTE: Media outlets quoted various unnamed officials stating that the alleged tunnel was anywhere from three to 70 meters in length.) Asked how the prisoners would have escaped if the tunnel story was untrue, contacts opined that a Yemeni security official "with enough clout" must have let them out. One individual speculated that Ali al-Mohsen, the northern area military commander who is related to the President and is from the same Hashid tribe, may have facilitated the jailbreak.

3. (C) All contacts that poloff surveyed said the "fact" that someone freed the prisoners and that they did not escape on their own was evidence of internal developments within the ROYG that are not entirely clear. Poloff observed to Yemeni Socialist Party Secretary General Yassin Saeed Noman that the local press did not seem "overly concerned" by the escape, to which Noman responded that, "Al-Qaeda in Yemen is a creation of the government. It is not like Al-Qaeda elsewhere." He continued that "80 percent" of the prisoners who escaped on February 3 were not associated with terrorism, but had been used by the Government to conduct operations against southern politicians during the 1994 civil war and even later. He speculated that certain ROYG officials may have let them out of prison in order to "use them again," although he did not know for what purpose. Separately, one Aden-based contact claimed that the Government is planning to employ the former detainees in assassinating southern politicians in the run-up to elections in September.

4. (C) Asked why the news of the prison break appeared first in "26 September," despite the Government's reputation for dragging its feet in reporting on potentially embarrassing developments, several ruling party members said the ROYG had learned from past mistakes and wanted to be "transparent," given the importance of the incident. Opposition members opined, however, that the ROYG wanted the first story published on the jailbreak to be its own, in order to tamp down inevitable rumors and speculation among the public and independent press. One former Member of Parliament pointed out that "there have been no pictures of this supposed tunnel and no visits to the prison site by the independent press." He added, "Look around town -- there has been no increase in the number of soldiers or police on the streets, no statements from high officials, and no mobilization like we saw for the recent kidnappings. It is business as usual." The Government is not overly concerned about the incident, he concluded, because "some powerful official is involved in this."

5. (C) Media outlets have primarily reprinted the "26 September" story, with comments from unnamed government officials relaying some of the escapees' names, and claiming that their photographs and other information have been passed to security offices throughout the country. Two independent publications on February 7 printed comments by the Saudi Ambassador to the United States made on CNN that he was confident that Yemen's security forces would round up the men. The only local commentary on the incident thus far appeared on February 7 on a website affiliated with the

Nasserite Unionist Party. The article cites the concerns of a human rights activist and others that the incident may have been orchestrated by the ROYG in order to secretly hand over the prisoners to the United States.

16. (C) COMMENT: Healthy skepticism of the Government is nothing new to Yemen, so it was to be expected that the public would have trouble believing the official version of Yemen's "great escape." Our contacts' firmly-held belief that the incident involved a high-level security official does have a ring of truth to it. The humiliation of the Political Security Organization may well have sealed the victory of the upstart National Security Bureau in its rivalry with its older and hitherto more firmly rooted sister organization. Our contacts' speculation that the Government plans to use these men for covert purposes or to hand them over to the USG, however, seems rather far-fetched. These terrorists are responsible for the worst terrorist attacks Yemen has ever faced -- attacks that devastated the Yemeni economy and caused worldwide embarrassment for President Saleh. The truth may take a while to unfold. One thing is certain in the meantime: PSO insiders must have been involved at least as facilitators of the escape. Whether this was motivated by corruption, rivalry or ideology remains to be seen. END COMMENT.  
Krajeski